



PARSI MILIEU IN BAPSY SIDHWA'S NOVELS; THE COW EATERS AND THE PAKISTANI BRIDE

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ABSTRACT

Bapsy Sidhwa will always be appreciated for her commended work in which she has brought the culture and tradition of Parsi religion on the surface that has been neglected since long. The Parsis are an ethno religious minority in India. Even in Pakistan, Parsis are in minority. As a community, they are well-off with few living below the appalling poverty line of the subcontinent. Bapsy Sidhwa tries to recreate a fictional yet typical saga of Parsis and the corresponding social milieu. The paper attempts to explore those surroundings of their culture that was forgotten long ago.

Article Info:

Article Received: 27/10/2014

Revised on: 2/11/2014

Accepted on: 5/11/2014

Keywords: *Parsi, Culture, Ethnic Group, Comic Mode, Individual Struggle.*

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Bapsy Sidhwa's is a prominent voice in the world of Commonwealth fiction. Sidhwa comes from a prominent Parsi business family, the Bhandaras of Pakistan. She was born in Karachi in 1938 to Tehimima and Peshoton Bhandara. Brought and educated in Lahore, she graduated from the Kinnaird College for Women, with a B.A. in 1956. The next year she married Gustad Kermani, but after his untimely death, she went on to marry, in 1963, Noshirwan R. Sidhwa, a businessman, and the son of R.K. Sidhwa, the freedom fighter from Sind. Apart from being writer she is also an active social worker. She was the Secretary of Mothers' and Children's House, a shelter for the destitute women; President of International Women's Club' Lahore; Chairperson of Social Welfare Committee, Punjab Club; and Pakistan's representative at the Asian Woman's Congress of 1975.

Her two novels are remarkably different from each other in both subject and treatment, so much that it is difficult to tell that they are from same author. The Crow Eaters' certainly belongs to the comic mode. It deals with the lives and fortunes of the Jungle wallas, a Parsi family in British India. Though it has serious touches here and there, farce and satire pervade the whole work. The novel derives its humor from a blend of fantasy, scatology, physical and verbal incongruity, and caricature. The first is as much a novel of Parsi life and manners as it is about individuals, and the second, similarly, about the interaction of two cultures, the mountainous tribe and the urban plain. Both display the novelist's taut and purposeful control of language. Sidhwa's is a plain, matter of fact, supple style, without ornate flourishes or unnecessary complications, yet it can rise to poetic intensity when the narrative demands it.



Thus, Sidhwa's overall prowess over the genre is impressive. Her range of settings, plots, themes, and characters makes her one of the most exciting of the recent Commonwealth novelists.

It was attacked by a section of the Parsi community, who considered it to be unfair portrayal. Its publication was even marked by a mock bomb threat (see Contemporary Authors). However, this criticism arises out of the consumption that the chief concern of the book is to portray the life of Parisis in India.

It is true that the protagonist, Faredoon Junglewalla, and all the major characters of the book are Parsi life and rituals (including Navajot ceremony, a wedding, death rites, and aspects of Zarathustran religion,) are minutely described in the book, yet these factors do not make the book an indictment or even an attack on the community. Rather, the characters and their tendencies are satirized, exploiting those ethnic features those are conducive to such satire. The Crow Eaters is not the novel particularly about Parisis; instead, it is a novel whose characters happen to be Parisis. The characters could well have been Hindu or Muslim and a good deal of satire would still have carried; each ethnic group, after all, has its peculiarities and absurdities.

The Crow Eaters is a loosely constructed narrative which begins with an extended flash-back. Freddy Jungle walla, now middle aged and prosperous, tells the story of his early years to a captive audience consisting of his seven children and some neighboring kids. He tells how at the end of the nineteenth century, at the age of twenty four, he earmarked on a journey to Punjab with his wife and mother-in-law; how he struggled many years with his mother-in-law for control over his house-hold; how, through a fraudulent insurance scheme in which he set fire to his shop and frightened his mother-in-law, he becomes both the master of his house and rich; and how he rose to power and eminence in the community with hard work and craft. This flash back continues through the first seventeen chapters, roughly a third of the book.

In the second or the middle portion of the book, chapters 18-30, the focus shifts somewhat from Freddy to his Children. Two daughters, Hutoxy and Ruby, are married off, and the third too, Yasmin, gets married later. The sons receive more emphasis.

Yazdi falls in love with rosy Watson, an Anglo Indian with a troubled family background. Freddy dissuades his son from this involvement, reminding him of the oath that Parsis took (to marry only within the community), when they came to India many centuries ago. Meanwhile Rosy is forced into prostitution and, shockingly, Freddy himself sleeps with her. When Freddy tells her Yazdi about this, Yazdi shattered. Soli, Freddy's eldest son, suddenly grows sick and dies, fulfilling astrological predictions of the mysterious Gopal Krishnan. This alters Yazdi completely. He renounces the world, using his monthly allowance to help the poor and homeless.

Though The Crow Eaters stands out for its low comedy and farce, these elements are not the sole strengths of the book. The middle section is largely serious and counterbalances the levity of other two. Yazdi's story of traumatic disappointment in love and subsequent rejection of the world, and Soli's death, give this section a somber hue. These events change Freddy irrevocably. He becomes a much more rounded character, realizing the mystery, complexity, and the suffering of life. The novelist seems to suggest that without sorrow there can be no gaiety and comedy, that both are independent aspects of life. Life's movement, hence, is seen as cyclical, going from comedy through tragedy back to comedy. It is this movement that engrosses and engages the author, not so much individual characters. That is why the focus shifts from character to character in the novel. The first section belongs to Freddy; in the middle, the attention shifts from Freddy to his children; finally, in the third section, it is Billy not Freddy, who is the chief actor. Money, love, sex, procreation, the passage of time, and the progression of society—all these comic concerns are seen merely as components of the larger rhythm of Life; Yazdi's renunciation is one aspect of life, while Billy's acquisition another.

The Crow Eaters thus explores both the superficial and the more profound dimensions of the comic mode. Not only is it an entertaining satire and farce on the foibles of its main characters, but also embodies a larger vision of the world, a vision which is best described as broad, tolerant, and sympathetic. Sidhwa says, "The Pakistani Bride is dedicated to the incredibly simple, deprived and courageous women



of this magnificent country." Indeed, at the core of the book is the struggle for survival of the heroine, Ziattoon, fleeing from the brutal, tribal society of Kohistan into which she has been married.

The episodic novel in the West usually consists of the adventures of one main character, loosely strung together. However, in Sidhwa's novel, even the protagonist is not central. The various events convey a sense of multiplicity and complexity of the human experience. It is the life that becomes important, not the fortune of the individual self. In this regard, *The Bride* resembles *The Crow Eaters*.

Sikander and Zohra's story contains in it the germ of all partition stories – communal frenzy, carnage, migration, and the break-up of families. Both Sikander and Zohra are killed, leaving the orphaned child Munni, later called Zaitoon by Qasim in the memory of his own dead daughter. Qasim and Zaitoon, thus become the reconstituted family, the unlikely coming together of two cultures, the hill and the plain, the fair and brown. Nikka's story shows the sophisticated evil of Lahore politics in comparison with the stark violence of the tribal society. Nikka is a professional assassin working for powerful political bosses. His story, which includes visits to brothels in Hira Mandi, familiarizes the reader with the ways of urban life. Qasim's and Zaitoon's trek to the hills is a gradual introduction to hill life for Zaitoon. Finally, Zaitoon's marriage and flight constitute the main story in proper.

The marriage, and the interlude of joy that follows, are both short-lived. Zaitoon's torture begins on the very next day after marriage. Soon after that she is in by her "tyrannical, animal-trainer" of a husband, who "beat her on the slightest pretext." Two months after her marriage, Zaitoon is severely battered for going upto the river against the commands of her husband. The river is the boundary between the tribal territory and the army. Beyond the river is the world Zaitoon is familiar with. She belongs to go back to it. Seeing her wave at the jawans across the river, Sakhi nearly kills her. After that, she decides to flee from her nightmarish world.

The image of women is reinforced graphically in the latter sections of the book. Zaitoon, though she belongs to the next generation, is brought up in Lahore, and even educated a little, is

forced to marry Sakhi against her wishes. She is never consulted and when, before the marriage, she begs her father not to marry him into his tribe, she is threatened with death. Once married to Sakhi, her life is miserable. She is abused and battered routinely, as pointed earlier, on the slightest pretext and suspicion. It would seem that the entire code of honour of the tribe rests on notions of sexual superiority and possessiveness.

The violence against women in the tribal society is more shocking because of its savagery. Sakhi beats Zaitoon not only with stick as above, but with sharp stones; he even kicks her. The violence is sexual and verbal, not only physical. On the wedding night itself, Sakhi establishes his proprietorship over Ziattoon's sexual organs themselves: "It's my cunt!" he breathed, holding her crotch in a warm squeeze."

Any normal gesture of friendship coming from a woman is interpreted in the grossest sexual terms. The violence of the language is nearly as degrading as physical violence. When he begins to beat her, in an instinctive gesture Zaitoon butts her head into his groin undoing his salwar.

Zaitoon's symbolic retaliation in the above scene and her decision to run away are not at all signs of her militant feminism or intentional defiance of the mail order. Throughout she has been portrayed as a docile, affectionate, obedient child. Her heroic role has, thus, been thrust upon her. This is the only way she can survive. It is a spiritual struggle, a last ditch stand of the weak and the oppressed. That is her victory is marvelous and encouraging slowly, she has become a symbol of all oppressed and exploited people.

Carol, despite the veneer of sophistication and gentility that surrounds her life, is also oppressed. Farukh is overbearingly possessive of her and is also feeling jealous. He seems, in this sense, like Sakhi. Of course, there are major differences. He never beats her and she decides to have an affair with Mustaq on her own. Yet, slowly, she begins to realize that the Major values her primarily as a sexual object.

The other images and glimpses of the life of women in the book are not very encouraging either. Ziattoon, despite Miriam's objections, is sent to school, but taken off when she is eleven, as soon as



she begins to menstruate. From then she spend sheer time in segregation of the zenanna, "the fecund, fetid world of mothers and babies". Life in the zenanna does not offer much.

Under these circumstances, Ziattoon's escape to freedom is a great victory against the system. That the system is indeed oppressive becomes clear even to old Hamida, Sakhi's mother, though she herself belongs to the tribe: "She, who had been so proud and valiant and whole heartedly subservient to the ruthless code of her forebears, now loathed it with all her heart." However, she is too weak and old to change anything. Hamida's thoughts are significant because she is what Ziattoon would be like if she continued to live in the hills: hers is the one of series of graphic images of women that the author employs to show that Ziattoon's options are. Hamida, once tall and pretty, is now a hideous hag, aged permanently at only forty by the hard labor and disease. Even in his condition, as mentioned earlier, she is brutally beaten by her own son. Ziattoon is already being battered by her husband; it would not be surprising if her son too treated her like Sakhi treats Hamida. Ziattoon rejects this option by running away. The second option would be to die in the hills of starvation or fall prey to some wild animal. Through luck and sheer grit she escapes this fate. However, Ziattoon escapes all these options and survives. What actually happens to her is not revealed at the end of book, but the author suggests some possibilities- all somewhat optimistic. Major Mustaq, who has helped in saving her life, speculates:

She would be all right, he mused. In few hours he would quietly stow her away in the vehicle taking Farokh and Carol to Lahore. Let Carol take care of her! She could hide her in the States ! Or perhaps Ashiqe could propose marriage after decent interval- she would be as securely hidden in his village.

Ziattoon's triumph can be appreciated properly only when she is compared with the prominent images of the other women in the novel: Afshan, married to Quasim, a boy of ten, in lieu of a loan; Miriam, matronly and domesticated, always in paradah; the grotesque , misshapen prostitute, and Shahnaz the high class courtesan; Hamida, a women broken by the hard life in the hills, beaten by her own

son; Carol, the American wife of Farukh, sexually exploited by major Mustaq; the unknown tribal girl, decapitated, head floating in dirty pond; and the crazy beggar woman of Lawrence Gardens, a plaything of her rapists.

Ziattoon is symbol not only of woman fighting oppression in Pakistan but of the human spirit struggling against all physical odds to survive and maintain its integrity. Ziattoon represents Khudi or the mental and spiritual strength oh human kind, indefatigable, indomitable and irrepressible. She represents the triumph of mind over matter, of spirit over flesh. It is only such strength, the book tells us that can withstand destiny which can overcome every conceivable type of oppression

The Bride is thus a very moving and powerful work of art. It portrays a great idealism, a philosophical outlook which shows the primacy of human spirit over physical and material obstacles.

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